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Wagner, Tamara S. *The Victorian Baby in Print: Infancy, Infant Care, and Nineteenth-Century Popular Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 320 pp.

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<1>Like many mothers, the arrival of my first baby prompted me to attempt – somewhat fruitlessly – to negotiate the wealth of competing advice on infant care and child rearing. Sleep was a particularly contentious issue: leave the baby to cry until they are so exhausted they eventually fall asleep allowing you to enjoy a well-deserved glass of wine (although not before your ear drums have been permanently damaged by the endless screaming), or practice attachment parenting and strap the baby to you twenty-four hours a day until they are eighteen and heading off to university. Carving a successful parenting path through the onslaught of 'helpful' materials on the subject is not easy – and neither is it a new phenomenon, as Tamara Wagner's excellent study of *The Victorian Baby in Print*demonstrates. Victorian mothers were also subject to competing discourses around infant care: not only in advice literature, but in popular fiction as well, including domestic fiction, the sensation novel, and the works of Dickens. Wagner's study explores representations of babyhood and infant care in these works, in a book that not only looks back to nineteenth-century literature and culture, but also speaks to contemporary concerns around baby rearing. Wagner writes eloquently in the Preface about the influence of her own experience of motherhood on her work, and it is fascinating to see the connections between Victorian and contemporary experiences of and attitudes towards child-rearing. Once upon a time, the personal was to be kept well away from academic research. There has been a significant shift in this respect in recent years, and Wagner's book evidences the value of such endeavours.

<2>The Victorian baby is a strangely obscure figure in critical discourses on nineteenth-century literature and culture to date – perhaps reflecting its frequent position as plot device, rather than fully formed character, in the Victorian novel. However, both maternity and childhood have received considerable critical attention, so the lack of focus on the figure of the baby is something of an anomaly

– particularly in the work of perennially critically popular writers such as Dickens. Wagner's work goes some way towards addressing this critical gap, though it is necessarily selective in the examples considered, and this respect opens the gate for further critical analyses of the subject in future. As Wagner demonstrates, representations of infants and infant care in nineteenth-century popular literature tell us much about prevailing middle-class ideologies around mothering. Wagner's study focuses primarily on representations of infants in Victorian fiction, with insightful analyses of works by Dickens, Charlotte Yonge, Mrs Henry Wood, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Wilkie Collins. Alongside these is a detailed examination of Victorian advice literature on infant care, evidencing the connections between nineteenth-century popular fiction and advice books – if not, necessarily, the lived experience of baby rearing. These works are, as Wagner notes, primarily middle-class discourses (reflecting middle-class dominance in the Victorian literary marketplace), but they nonetheless include (sometimes stereotypically negative) representations of infant care amongst the poorer classes.

<3>*The Victorian Baby in Print* contradicts any assumption that babies and infant care belong exclusively to the realms of the maternal and the domestic in nineteenth-century literature and culture. By contrast, debates around infants and infancy are closely bound up with legal, intellectual, and scientific discourses. New legislation, including the 1839 Custody of Infants Act and the 1872 Infant Life Protection Act, was passed in response to some of these debates. Scientific work, including evolutionary theory, shone a light on the significance of infancy, and in turn influenced fictional representations of the figure of the Victorian baby, which, as Wagner shows, not infrequently drew on scientific understandings of issues such as hereditary traits. Wagner's study challenges popular and critical interpretations of and assumptions about representations of the figure of the baby in the work of a range of writers. In the opening chapter, Wagner considers Dickens's babies: typically perceived in relation to popular stereotypes or comic caricatures. As Wagner notes, though, whilst 'At first sight many of his fictional infants might well seem like stock-figures' (43), they are in fact closely bound up with his complex social criticism, and through his various depictions of infancy, he 'satirizes the commodification of babyhood' (44) and 'self-consciously negotiate[s] the often contradictory and ambiguous ways in which the Victorians thought and wrote about babies' (106). The second chapter evidences the close links between popular parenting advice literature and the depictions of infancy found in Victorian popular fiction. The market for infant care guides – and advice literature more generally – expanded significantly over the course of the century, and included many works authored by male doctors who promoted the idea that mothers needed 'expert' advice in order to adequately care for their babies. The authority of other, female-authored

advice works, though, was frequently founded on maternal experience. As Wagner notes, 'The result was a bewildering market of childrearing instructions in print' (107) – a situation all too familiar to today's parents. Such works were frequently informed by (pseudo-)scientific discourses, as well as by prevailing class and gender ideologies, and in turn, Wagner contends, they influenced fictional representations of babyhood. This relationship is evident in Eliza Warren's *How I Managed My Children From Infancy to Marriage* (1865) – a work which, Wagner asserts, 'provides a crucial link between professional parenting instructions and the interpolation of baby care advice in popular fiction' (111). This influence, though, as Wagner points out, is mutual, for Warren's work evidently 'harnesses strategies from domestic fiction' (131), thus emphasising the flexible boundaries between these two genres of Victorian popular writing.

<4>Wagner's penultimate chapter explores the domestic fiction of Charlotte Yonge, and this too evidences the influence of wider cultural debates around infancy and infant care. Yonge's novels offer 'representation[s] of unsentimentalized infants and the daily routines of baby care' (45). In contrast to those works explored in Wagner's final chapter, Yonge privileges domestic realism over sensationalism, and her fiction 'self-consciously explores changing parenting practices in Victorian Britain' (156), whilst advocating 'a fundamentally middle-class vision of ideal parenting by juxtaposing divergent, class-bound expectations and practices' (157).

<5>Realism is not, of course, the central concern of Victorian sensation fiction, and babies inevitably feature in sensational plots in works by Collins, Braddon, and their contemporaries – often involving illegitimacy, child abandonment or murder, and adoption. Despite this, though, as Wagner argues in her final chapter, 'babyhood plays a complex role' in this key Victorian popular genre, and indeed the sensationalizing of the Victorian baby frequently works to 'shatter a clichéd iconography' (216).

<6>Babies, then, for novelists, advice writers, and social commentators, became a useful device through which various ideologies could be channelled. As a consequence, their multifaceted representations in Victorian literature and culture offer a means through which such discourses and ideologies can be critically interrogated, as Wagner's study ably demonstrates. Her focus is predominantly, though not exclusively, on mid-Victorian literature and culture. Further work in this area might usefully explore the relationship between babies and New Woman writing at the *fin de siècle* – the wizened, syphilitic, and short-lived baby in Sarah Grand's *TheHeavenly Twins* (1893) for example – employed as a vehicle for the novel's social criticism, or the various representations of babies in Olive Schreiner's

writing, at times reflecting Schreiner's own tragic maternal experiences: as with the contemporary critic – such as Wagner – whose own experiences of mothering lead to a reconsideration of Victorian maternal representations, nineteenth-century writers at times write their own maternal experiences into their work.

<7>Wagner's study is both timely and important. In her work, the Victorian baby emerges from the shadows of nineteenth-century writing to shine a light on the maternal, domestic – gendered and classed – discourses in which it plays a pivotal role. It is brought crawling and gurgling into full view, and our own society's indebtedness to the debates surrounding this figure made clear.